



Essential Services Commission - Advice from Independent Engagement Expert

Towong Council

13 June 2017

Revised 10 July 2017

Thank you for the opportunity to review the submission from Towong Council on their approach to engagement with the community around their application for a higher cap under the Fair Go Rates System.

Outlined below is my response to their original application and my additional comments when supplementary information was provided later in the process.



Kathy Jones
Executive Chair
KJA





Essential Services Commission - Advice from Independent Engagement Expert

Summary of contents provided and completeness. Clarity of reasons for methodology. Integrity of delivery.

Council has acknowledged that their conversations with their communities have been informed by their experience, especially since the introduction of their long-term financial plan four years ago they have reviewed the advice given in the FGRS Guidance material.

The reasoning for the Community Forum approach is to engage the higher rate cap application that is logical and based on previous experience. The explanation of the process they went through to attract people to these forums concluded that there was an unprecedented number of people who attended these forums. (3.3%)

This is a good outcome, though the quality of the input of the people attending is really most of interest and we await the delivery of the outcomes report to make a final judgement on the integrity of the process.

Related issues in Trade-off and Alternative funding.

The five questions asked of the attendees of the forums are good questions but only question 5 begins to address the trade-off issue. No evidence has been given as to what the outcome of the question was.

Does the engagement program contain clear accessible and comprehensive information and follow a timely process to engender feedback from the community? Does it satisfactorily detail the following? What council did to engage with their ratepayers and communities, what information was provided during the engagement process, how this information was presented and how feedback was gathered and what this feedback was.

There is no evidence of a plan nor of a set of Community Engagement Principles that's guiding the council's interaction with its community. The analysis and reasoning behind the engagement approaches is quite mature so an engagement policy document would not be a difficult thing to produce and would be useful for those community members who do not attend the forums to reference should they want to know, how the community is involved in decision making.

The information was presented in a presentation format. A copy of the agenda and the presentation would be useful to review in order to understand the level of interactivity of the forum and the integrity of the content.



Is engagement on going and tailored to community needs? Does the program fit in with Councils ongoing SRP engagement?

Council has an ageing population with minimal digital take up. Council's previous experience has shown that community forums are the best way to talk to their community.

Council has explained that for the FGRS forums, a more intense 'call to action' program was developed including advertisements and letter box drops. This yielded a greater attendance than they usually attract to engagement activities.

Evidence of this learning could be shown in the development of an engagement policy.

Related issues in Value and Efficiency.

There is no evidence of the cost of the engagement program as compared to previous programs. Also there is no cost attributed to the creation of a community development function at Council, though council should be praised for recognising that the community would like to see this function included in Council's forward plans in the context of such budget pressure.

Does the engagement program prioritise matters of significance and impact? Does it satisfactorily detail the following? How Council considered the scale of the higher rate cap, whether the higher rate cap is addressing short term or long term financial needs, how engagement was conducted in the context of the issues above, how the options or trade-offs were presented, what Council learnt about the community's priorities through the engagement process, how Council assessed differing community views.

The forums are certainly positioned as part of the continued discussion around balancing the budget and the role that rates have in the sustainability of the Council.

To verify this it would be useful to see the CEO's presentation.

The size of rate rises has been a consideration of Council's over the length of the current long term financial plan. The ability of its ratepayers to pay additional rates has moderated Council's reliance on rate rises as has been shown by the adjustment of the increased cap granted by the ESC last year.

This is commendable and is hopefully being communicated to the ratepayers in the context of how all issues are being balanced in the desire to achieve sustainability. It is important for ratepayers to understand how their views and actions are a key consideration in Council's decisions about trade-offs.

Has the engagement program led to communities becoming more informed about council decision making? Does it satisfactorily detail the following? How the engagement program was evaluated, how feedback was gathered and what this feedback was, how the outcomes of the engagement process were communicated with the community, how the engagement undertaken influenced Council's decision to apply for a higher rate cap, how Council is responding to issues raised during the engagement and why, how Council dealt with or is dealing with unmet community expectations in relation to rate increases and/or service provision and how Council maintains ongoing communication with its community.



There is no evidence to show this. There is an outstanding report to the community document due in mid-June which should help with understanding how Council has approached the evaluation process and has communicated this back to their ratepayers.

An engagement policy will help to define the ongoing two way communication with the community – perhaps this is something that the new community development function can own.

What were views of ratepayers and the community about the rate increase?

There is no specific evidence to detail what the views of the Community Forum attendees were.

The evidence in the report is anecdotal, including a selection of quotes from different participants with no comparative evidence base

How were these views taken into account by Council in making their decision?

Council has been using a communications resource for only 8 hours a week. Community members have asked that communications be improved. Council has committed to establishing a community development role in 2017/18 to address this issue.

Comments about gaps in contents.

Would be useful to know the demographics of the attendees. Was the 3.3% who attended the forums representative of the general demographics of the area?

List any items identified for future information.

Need a copy of the feedback report which is being distributed to the community in June.



Additional advice provided as part of further ESC and Council Consultation

The Community Engagement Strategy

This is a good document which clearly shows Council's commitment to engagement and provides some guidance for Council officers undertaking engagement programs, including an excellent and simple pro forma which should be able to be used by non-engagement specialists. The diagram showing the role of engagement vis á vis governance, citizenship and community is a good one but it should have two way arrows to show that one of the outcomes of these engagement programs is increased capacity for the citizens to understand decisions and for those decisions to be reflective of the input from the engagement activities.

I note that the document is a draft and undated, though it does have a covering note to say that it will be reviewed again in June. It will be important for Council to finalise and formalise this document.

Report on the Community Forums

The document is very thorough and gives a good understanding of the carriage and content of the forums.

The twin objectives of the forums - to determine what services are important to its communities and to assist in prioritising and aligning the expectations of residents and ratepayers with Council's capacity to deliver - is well stated. One of the key objectives of the ESC in the FGRS policy is for citizens to have an increased understanding of the decisions and trade-offs that need to be made by Councils when addressing financial sustainability and capacity challenges. Council has acknowledged this in its objective setting and in its approach to the

information presented to the community members at the forums. Unfortunately, the questions at the end of each session did not address the matter of additional knowledge and therefore understanding of why some initiatives may not be possible. Detailing this approach means that those people who do not get what they want, in answer to the question about "what would you like us to do more of", are better able to understand why it is not possible to satisfy their requests.

Has the document been distributed to the community in any way or at least to the participants in the forums? The tables analysing what can be done about the requests from each forum are excellent and should be publicly available. In the same context, an executive summary analysing the answers to the last two questions from across all forums, would be very useful both for the ESC and the community. Specifically: "Are you getting 'value for money' from Councils and if not, why not? How do you measure 'value for money'?" and "what rate increase (if any) are you prepared to pay to maintain the current level of services and infrastructure? And what are you prepared to do without?"



Melbourne office

Suite 1102, 530 Little Collins Street Melbourne VIC 3000
PO Box 16215, Collins Street West VIC 8007
T 03 9005 2030

Sydney office

Level 9, 2 Elizabeth Plaza, North Sydney NSW 2060
PO Box 302, North Sydney NSW 2059
T 02 9955 5040 F 02 9955 5901

E info@kjassoc.com.au | www.kjassoc.com.au

